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ABSTRACT

Intended for administrators and policy makers as well as teachers, this digest identifies for prospective purchasers various sources that offer reviews of educational computer software for English and the language arts. Following an introduction, the first section of the digest discusses content-specific as well as general educational computing subscription publications. The next two sections examine help available from professional associations and consortia services. The fourth section explores online sources for titles of recommended software, while the fifth discusses sources for published catalogs of approved software. The final section covers informal sources, such as independent distributors and consultants. (HTH)

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ERIC Digest

HOW TO FIND GOOD COMPUTER SOFTWARE IN ENGLISH AND LANGUAGE ARTS

Anne Auten

One of the great sports in the field of educational computing is called "find the good software," particularly in the field of English, reading, and the other language arts. Many English teachers, spurning the current unsatisfactory software developed for computer assisted instruction, have turned away from CAI and toward the use of the computer as a tool for teaching word processing in composition instruction and for computer database searching in units on library skills.

The ease of developing lower level computer software and the difficulty of programing some areas of the language arts curriculum are largely responsible for the less-than-ideal quality of software currently available. Because many aspects of language arts involve mental and verbal processes not adapted easily to computer-delivered instruction, software developers have been producing programs that, for the most part, are drill and practice lessons on aspects that are more easily defined: parts of speech, spelling, vocabulary, punctuation, and syntax.

In a sense, the problem of finding good software is further complicated by the fact that some good CAI materials have appeared on the market--for example, tutorials that deal with the cloze procedure in teaching reading, sentence combining, and general comprehension. Educators now need the ability to evaluate software knowledgeably and the resources that provide thorough, up-to-date software reviews. For a brief discussion of evaluating language arts software, see the ERIC digest, "Software Evaluation for the Teacher of English Language Arts." This particular digest

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identifies for prospective purchasers various sources that offer reviews of language arts software.

REVIEWS IN SUBSCRIPTION PUBLICATIONS

The most readily available resource for software reviews is subscription publications. English and language arts educators now have a content-specific journal that reports software applications and evaluations in their discipline. Computers, Reading and Language Arts is a quarterly journal that features extensive reviews written by computer-using educational specialists. Each CRLA courseware evaluation follows a prescribed format that includes the program sequence, the program's educational intent and content, a discussion of the instructional technique(s) used by the program, and a description of any support literature or documentation provided by the publisher.

In addition to CRLA, English and language arts specialists have another content-specific resource in The Computing Teacher which, since it began publishing, has featured a monthly column, "Computers in the Teaching of English," edited by Robert Shostak and Lester Golub. English teachers are invited to submit reports on their use of computers in the classroom and to describe applications of particular software packages.

English and language arts specialists have found the monthly software reviews in other educational computing journals such as Electronic Learning, Electronic Education and Teaching and Computers to be a helpful resource. In addition to reviews of software designed for their discipline, they look at materials developed for other areas such as social studies, business communication, or word problem solving in mathematics. These programs often can be used to advantage as discussion starters for prewriting sessions or as exercises in logical thinking or persuasive argument in a language arts setting. Electronic

Education has presented an "Annual Buyer's Guide" for the last three years, an annotated list of programs grouped according to content area designed to assist educators with end-of-year purchasing decisions. The May/June 1984 issue of Teaching and Computers offered a pull-out supplement that briefly described more than 70 programs recommended by teachers. The latter journal, published by Scholastic, Inc. for elementary-level educators, also carries a regular feature called "Software Showcase: Software Recommended for Teachers by Teachers," that provides one- or two-paragraph evaluations. In addition, each issue offers a detailed discussion of a "Program of the Month," complete with a listing of the programming code. These noncommercial programs have been designed by teachers who make them available to others interested in computer-assisted instruction. Even such general computing journals as Personal Software: The Monthly Review of the Best Packages offer extensive reviews of a selection of educational software packages in each issue.

While not educational computing journals per se, three other subscription publications offer extensive reviews of educational software, and would serve well those teachers looking for good language arts software. The first is EPIE and Consumers Union Microcomputer Courseware PRO/FILES, a set of 8 1/2" x 11" file cards and file box, complete with subject matter dividers. Software in subject matter areas that could be effective in the English/language arts classroom include The Arts, Business Education, Computer Literacy, Language Arts, Logic/Problem Solving, Reading, and Social Studies. These headings are indicated in bold print at the top of each evaluation card, making them easy to file and find. Each monthly update of cards offers subscribers a summary and in-depth evaluation of 30 individual software packages distributed across the curriculum. The discussion of each package has four major strands: goals and objectives, contents, methods and approach, and evaluation and

management. Next is Courseware Report Card, a publication available in both elementary and secondary editions that presents two-to four-page summary/evaluations of 25-30 packages per issue. Users of Apple, Atari, Commodore, and Radio Shack microcomputers can subscribe to separate editions.

Finally, for those who have neither the time nor the money to subscribe to several educational computer journals, The Digest of Software Reviews: Education provides abstracts and indices of reviews from over 60 publications in the U.S. and Canada. A software program must have had a minimum of two published reviews to be selected for inclusion in The Digest.

Keep in mind that reviews of specific microcomputer brand-compatible programs are also published in journals by various hardware manufacturers. Apple computer's Journal of Courseware Review is an example.

HELP FROM PROFESSIONAL ASSOCIATIONS

While neither of the two major support organizations for teachers of English, reading, and the other language arts--the National Council of Teachers of English (NCTE) and the International Reading Association (IRA)--regularly publishes software reviews, they are involved and interested in microcomputer usage in their content area classrooms. NCTE's Committee on Instructional Technology has published guidelines for evaluating language arts software; IRA's Committee on Technology and Reading has produced Guidelines for Educators designed to help reading teachers make the best possible use of the new technologies. Both associations publish journals that carry articles recommending various software programs. For example, the IRA journal, The Reading Teacher, carries a monthly column called "Printout" with CAI suggestions for elementary reading teachers. Apart from NCTE and IRA, the National Education Association supports an Educational

Computer Service that publishes a catalog of "NEA Teacher Certified" software. The software has been evaluated and approved by trained programmers and teachers using specific guidelines.

CONSORTIA SERVICES

At both national and state levels, computer-oriented educational consortia have been organized to offer educators such services as teacher inservice workshops, "help" hotlines for technical assistance, hardware acquisition, and software reviews and recommendations.

State and local consortia often provide, as one of their services, a library of software packages for teachers to preview. The January and February 1984 issues of Electronic Learning include a directory listing the location, size of inventory, and contact person for each state's noncommercial preview centers, many of which have been developed by state-supported regional consortia, as well as university labs, individual school districts, and educational associations. At the national level, the Educational Software Evaluation Consortium, representing 27 organizations involved in computer education throughout North America, has developed a list of favorably reviewed instructional software for K-12 classrooms.

ONLINE SOURCES

Using a microcomputer and a modem, educators can locate titles of recommended software by searching commercial information databases. The microSIFT Reviews, prepared by the Northwest Regional Educational Laboratory's Computer Technology Program, are available in the Resources in Computer Education (RICE) database and in the ERIC database. The reviews are also available in print editions through regional and local educational service agencies. The format of a microSIFT Review is a page of comments in the

areas of instructional objectives, instructional prerequisites, content and structure, potential uses, major strengths and weaknesses, and a 21-item checklist from the microSIFT software evaluation form.

Both the RICE and the ERIC files are provided by Bibliographic Retrieval Services (BRS) and are available to those who have a search contract with BRS in Latham, New York. The ERIC file is also available through the DIALOG Information Retrieval Service, as is the Microcomputer Index file. The Microcomputer Index is a subject and abstract guide to magazine articles from over 40 microcomputer journals, and includes software reviews published in those journals. As with BRS, DIALOG users are assigned a password in their search contract and are billed only for the time they use the database.

PUBLISHED CATALOGS

Facing the plethora of catalogs produced by software and hardware companies can be overwhelming. In addition to the catalogs published by manufacturers, individual distributors list software they claim is "teacher-tested." Companies such as Scholastic, Hammett, and the Society for Visual Education (SVE) produce catalogs listing what they describe as educator-evaluated and approved software. Most of these distributors are willing to offer a free examination and return policy.

When searching for potential program titles for English and language arts, from any catalog, educators should not hesitate to examine software descriptions in content areas other than English language arts. Shirley Keran, language arts software designer for the Minnesota Educational Computing Consortium (MECC), suggests that many programs exist for other disciplines that can augment the work of the language arts teacher. If an English teacher believes that world events can be the topic for an essay, then

software developed for social studies could be applicable. "The epicenters of earthquakes and the waterways of voyageurs can be simulated, studied, and researched" says Keran. "Many simulations could be used in social studies for one set of activities and in language arts for another."

INFORMAL SOURCES

A final suggestion for educators interested in locating English and language arts software is to identify and befriend an independent distributor of software. A growing number of computer-using teachers are becoming distributors for companies whose products they have used successfully with their students. Many of these enthusiastic entrepreneurs attend trade shows, preview the latest software releases and in general keep current with both software and hardware developments. As a rule, they are willing to consult with educational administrators interested in introducing CAI to their staffs, to offer inservices on software applications in the various content areas, and to make new software releases available for review.

All of the sources described in this digest are suggested only to assist educators in locating software for preview; because the criteria used for evaluation differ from one source to another, no qualitative review, no matter how positive it sounds, should be taken as an endorsement to purchase and use a piece of software without a preview by those who will be its ultimate users.

Sources for Software Reviews

Subscription Publications

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Courseware Report Card, Educational Insights, 150 West Carob Street, Compton, CA 90220, $59.50/year.

Digest of Software Reviews: Education, 1341 Bulldog Lane, Suite C, Fresno, CA 93710, $52.95/year.

Electronic Education, Electronic Communications, Inc., Suite 220, 1311 Executive Center Drive, Tallanassee, FL 32301, $18/year.

Electronic Learning, Scholastic Inc., 730 Broadway, New York, NY 10003-9538, $19/year.

Journal of Courseware Review, Apple Computer, 20525 Mariana Avenue, Cupertino, CA 95014, $5.95/issue.

Micro-Courseware PRO/FILES, EPIE and Consumers Union, P.O. Box 839, Watermill, NY 11976, $125/year, including a one-year subscription to The Computing Teacher.

Personal Software, P.O. Box 2919, Boulder, CO 80323, $24/year.

Teaching and Computers, Scholastic Inc., 730 Broadway, New York, NY 10003-9538, $19/year.

The Computing Teacher, The International Council for Computers in Education (ICCE), University of Oregon, 1787 Agate Street, Eugene, OR 97403-1923, $21.50/year.

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